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ABSTRACT

Seeking to involve students more actively in their writing assignments, two teachers developed a group of sequential writing assignments with an interdisciplinary emphasis for students in an advanced writing course. The goal of these writing assignments was to give students who had solved most of their mechanical writing problems a chance to explore their own experiences and achieve an active command in a particular subject area while polishing their writing skills. Each assignment had a cycle of four activities designed to involve students in increasingly complex writing tasks. The four stages of each writing assignment were as follows: (1) a free writing activity in which students would "brainstorm" their subject area; (2) a focused, structured paragraph of 12 to 15 sentences on the topic, again depending exclusively on personal experience; (3) a structured essay of five to six paragraphs, designed for a general audience, that added support to the personal-experience material with information from the popular media; and (4) a structured report intended for a specialized audience and supported with information from professional books and journals as well as from the popular media and personal experience. The cycle was used in four writing assignments throughout a semester and combined with additional instruction on rhetoric, writing mechanics, and research methodology. (RL)

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CS 206 298

FROM COMPOSITION TO CAREER: SEQUENTIAL ASSIGNMENTS FOR PROFESSIONAL WRITING

Lillian M. Bisson

The approach and the materials described below stem from some work which I and Deborah Fort, now of the American Council on Education, undertook to encourage students to take more active command of their research efforts. We use these materials in an Advanced Composition course, the third level in Marymount College of Virginia's writing program which also includes a basic course and a traditional Composition course. They could, however, be adapted to fit anywhere in a college writing program after the basic level.

Our approach grew out of both some theoretical concerns which I'll mention later and some practical classroom realities which I'm sure many of you share. First, we faced demands from faculty in the professional fields that writing courses better prepare students for the kind of writing they encounter in their majors and, ostensibly anyway, out in the working world. Coupled with this pressure was our own determination that writing become not purely a tool for job advancement but also a means of self-discovery.

Perhaps most compelling was our frustration as writing teachers. For in spite of having some success in convincing students to be concrete and specific, to narrow their subjects and focus their materials, and to recreate their experiences as intensely as possible, we came to expect disastrous papers the first time we required students to move beyond personal experience and to incorporate outside information like statistics, cases, and authori-

ties for support. They simply were not making the transition. What they had learned about effective writing disappeared overnight, and all the bad habits they had picked up in years of writing about topics concerning which they had neither initial information nor direct experience reasserted themselves. I am purposely making blanket generalizations here. For until we began working on the problem, we found almost no exceptions. Although not all were this incoherent, sane, intelligent students would produce sentences like the following:

> The visually impaired child as with all handicapped children require basically the same needs yet with different techniques to arrive at these goals. Learning materials are identical to those for normal children; therefore, they are equal in cognitive abilities and mainstreaming would seem beneficial.

This student had earlier written movingly about her work with emotionally disturbed children. Yet turned to a research assignment, she produced such maddening, mindless prose. Not only did she succumb to educational jargon--set phrases like "cognitive abilities," "visually impaired," and "mainstreaming"-- but also she showed absolutely no sense of her own intelligence's role in shaping what she was saying--that is, that children who don't see well have the same need and ability to learn as other children but that their teachers may need to use special methods to help them. Her pseudo-fluency reveals the "prepackaging" feature of language, that phenomenon which Mina Shaughnessy noted in the work of the more advanced writers to whom she compared her basic strugglers (Errors and Expectations, p. 208).

In addition to prepackaged individual sentences, student efforts at research papers reveal a larger problem: an aimless approach to their whole topics. We have all suffered through reading patchwork papers— strings of direct quotations and partial paraphrase linked together by the weakest threads of transition, papers whose authors stare in stunned disbelief when charged with plagiarism. The root of their problem is passivity: one student recently told me that she planned to begin work on her first essay by going to the library to find a few articles on her topic so she could decide what to say. Barring a miracle, such an effort is foredoomed to mediocrity or worse. For instead of thinking of her sources as means of bolstering what she wants to say, she sees her task to be that of gluing together, in no particular context, what others have already said. Out of such a process the writer may acquire additional information but not likely new insights— the process will be boring for her, the product probably infuriating for her captive reader. Free readers—not friends and not paid teachers— will not move beyond the first paragraph.

Seeking to involve our students more actively in their research, we produced a group of sequential writing assignments geared to the mostly career-oriented programs of Marymount students in fields like nursing, business administration, applied arts and education. Among the topics we developed are the following: for business majors— participatory management, job satisfaction, consumerism; for nursing students— nutrition, medical ethics, caring for sick children; for education majors— testing, sex education, good and bad teachers. Students in more traditional academic fields like English and art history have assignments geared to their majors as well.

Our goal was to design materials for students who have solved most of their basic mechanics problems. The sequence we structured allows students to explore their own experiences deriving personal, usable insights which lead them to achieve that active command over subject matter so lacking in the patchwork papers. We provide a practical format through which students can move, in a series of three or four stages, to a report suitable in both substance and style for a course in their own fields. Each assignment"cycle" confronts students with increasingly complex writing tasks for more expert audiences; each level functions as a discovery or prewriting activity for the next level. Students draw on what they already know, either consciously or unconsciously, about their subjects so that they discover a thesis within themselves rather than at best adopting one ready-made from the surface of their materials, at worst presenting their reluctant readers with an incoherent, proposal-free collage.

On the last page of this article you'll find a sample assignment cycle. Its topic, job satisfaction, might well appear in business administration courses, but anyone who has worked could complete it.

As you can see, each assignment has four levels. First, there is a free writing activity or journal which asks that students explore as spontaneously as possible their own recollections, striving for flow and specificity, that stream of natural language which Macrorie and others tell us pours out from the unconscious when a person deeply engages in telling the truth about something she cares about (Searching Writing, p. 32). At this level students don't labor over formalities; wording, mechanics, focus don't con-

cern them. We ask them to write without editing for about half an hour. As you can see, on the job satisfaction cycle, students first brainstorm about their job likes and dislikes then recreate a work-related incident which left them feeling either good or bad about the job they had done.

At the next level students write a twelve-to-fifteen-sentence paragraph once again stemming exclusively from personal experience. Although we don't prescribe a methodology, we do expose students to traditional approaches to paragraph development like using topic and subtopic sentences and developing by means of comparison and contrast, definition, cause and effect, and the like. At this stage, in addition to vividness and specificity, students must also concern themselves with focus and structure; they must step back from their experience, analyze it, and use it as supporting evidence. It's often difficult for them to do so at first. For example, on the job satisfaction assignment, one student had vivdly described in her journal the pleasure she had derived from one of her campus jobs-- making posters to publicize a college dance-- even though no one had complimented her on the results. Her account clearly showed that what she had enjoyed was the freedom to approach her task with little direction from a supervisor. Yet she needed help to reach that insight before she could arrive at a meaningful generalization to serve as the topic sentence for her paragraph.

The most difficult transition occurs at the third level: the general audience essay. To personal experience, students must now add support from outside sources and must produce essays of five-to-six paragraphs. We encourage them to seek information in the popular media-- newspapers, tele-

vision, movies, and the kinds of magazines indexed in the Readers' Guide--as well as in interviews with friends and acquaintances. Here bad habits struggle to reassert themselves. But our format combats them by encouraging students to explore what they already know about a subject and what they think they want to say about it before, like Whitman's patient spider, they start sending out filaments into the void. Because the essay continues the expression begun in the journal, students are more likely to actively control, shape, and explain their materials rather than just patching them together. Their library excursions become forays for authorities, statistics, and cases which will help them say more convincingly what they want to say.

The following techniques have helped me to get students to bridge the distance between their own experiences and outside materials:

(1) continuing the linkage practiced at the second level by insisting that at least one supporting example in their essays be derived from personal experience;

(2) using media models which effectively insert personal details into articles discussing larger issues of general interest. The Washington Post's editorial section frequently yields good examples like Michel McQueen's "Black Woman, White Man" (January 25, 1981) which places statistics on interracial marriages side be side with a personal account of the writer's decision to enter into such a union and Henry Fairlie's "The More You See the Rich, The Less Enviable They Seem" (January 25, 1981) which moves effectively between personal anecdotes and quotations from authorities like Veblen;

(3) doing exercises which illustrate the malleability of facts and showing that a fact by itself means nothing until a writer gives it meaning by placing it in a context and explaining how the reader should interpret it. Having students use the same facts to make different points helps them to realize that facts do not speak for themselves. For example, the fact that the number of freshman women choosing education as a major dropped from 38 to 10% between 1969 and 1979 (Chronicle of Higher Education, January 28, 1981) can support several unrelated theses: that more women now choose non-traditional majors, that schools may soon suffer from a lack of first-rate teachers, that only the truly dedicated now pursue a career whose job possibilities have become severely restricted, that women have become more materialistic and less interested in playing nurturing roles. Students need to realize that what the fact means depends, in large part, on what the writer wants to say;

(4) heightening students' awareness of their audience— I have encouraged them to think of their classmates as representative of the general audience they are addressing. After selecting their topics, students share their preconceptions about each other's subjects and write brief comments summarizing their attitudes. A student preparing to write an essay on anti-Semitism profited from recognizing that the group had a textbook familiarity with the topic but thought of it as a problem of the past. Another student whose subject was dressing for success realized that not all of her audience was totally sympathetic: one of her classmates had written, "I don't believe in dressing for success. You would have a hard time convincing me otherwise." Having explicit rather than imagined audience reactions helps inexperienced writers plan more effectively and provides a valuable tool for the teacher in suggesting appropriate revisions.

Through techniques like these, students work at pulling together diverse materials on a subject of general interest for a non-specialist audience. Such experiences prepare them for fourth level writing project: a six-or-seven-page report for a specialized audience using sources from their own fields in addition to those previously used. At this level we also direct students to the professional indexes— the Education Index, the Business Periodicals Index, the Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature— and we require them to use the style manuals of their own divisions— either MLA, APA or Turabian. Many of these fourth level assignments use a case approach, asking students to place themselves in a particular situation for a specific imagined audience. For example, the sample asks the writer to assume the role of consultant providing advice on how to improve employee morale and boost productivity. Though moving to more sophisticated audiences and sources, students writing at this level still draw on the methods and kinds of materials developed at the earlier stages. We also urge them to continue expressing themselves in a confident, personal voice.

The following chart summarizes our requirements at each level:

LEVEL ONE: SPONTANEOUS JOURNAL

BRAINSTORMING LISTS, SENSORY DETAIL FROM REMEMBERED EXPERIENCE

LEVEL TWO: FOCUSED, STRUCTURED, PARAGRAPH

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE SUPPORT

LEVEL THREE: STRUCTURED ESSAY FOR A GENERAL AUDIENCE

SECONDARY SOURCE DRAWN FROM POPULAR MEDIA AND INTERVIEWS COMBINED WITH PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSED IN A CONFIDENT, PERSONAL VOICE

LEVEL FOUR: STRUCTURED REPORT FOR A SPECIALIZED AUDIENCE

SECONDARY SOURCES DRAWN FROM PROFESSIONAL BOOKS AND JOURNALS AS WELL AS THE POPULAR MEDIA AND INTERVIEWS COMBINED WITH PERSONAL EXPERIENCE SUPPORT AND EXPRESSED IN A CONFIDENT, PERSONAL VOICE

At Marymount the course in which we use these assignments is one level above the regular Composition course; next fall it will fulfill a junior level writing requirement in certain fields as well as provide an option for students who test out of Composition. We combine these materials with rhetorical instruction, mechanics review, and research methodology. Each student works through four cycles of writing assignments like the ones in your sample, each cycle lasting from three to five weeks depending on the level completed.

All students work through the same first trio of assignments which we call "the invisibility cycle," a title derived from Ralph Ellison's novel. We ask students to identify with Ellison's nameless narrator by recreating their own experiences of being discriminated against-- times when they have felt invisible as students, patients, customers, partygoers, and the like. No one who has survived childhood and adolescence is without an invisibility experience to draw upon. A follow-up assignment asks them to reverse their perspectives and either to recreate their invisibility experiences from the point of view of their tormentors or, alternatively, to recall instances when they have been the bullies or have treated others with indifference, an exercise that often proves painful but enlightening. These explorations serve as prewriting activities for the first essay assignment-- to write about some individual or group victimized by discrimination, an overworked topic to which we have seen fresh approaches because of students' often newly gained insight into the problem.

Once everyone has completed the invisibility cycle, students choose individually from the other available assignments. For the second cycle we stipulate only that they must select a topic from outside their majors; since they don't move beyond the essay level in this cycle, avoiding their own specialties combats a too-limited focus without demanding too-great expertise. The third round of assignments lasts five weeks; here students must choose from their own fields and work through the specialized report. For the last series all students again work on the same project-- a communication arts assignment which focuses on the writer's stance and offers a more sophisticated exploration of point of view than does the invisibility cycle. The long cycle can come at any point after the first. But we have found that assigning it as the third of four cycles works best in avoiding end-of-term pressures and allowing time for revision. Other teachers could, of course, assign more or fewer complete or incomplete cycles as their tastes, students' abilities, and paper-grading stamina dictate.

As you can see, these assignments attempt to bridge the distance between what James Britton has termed expressive and transactional language (The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18) and what Linda Flower has called writer-based and reader-based prose ("Problem-Solving Strategies and the Writing Process," College English, 39(1977),449-461). We try to develop students' ability to connect language which is close to the self with language whose purpose is to impart information to an audience. For the most part, government, industry, and academe ask for the latter. But our profession has for some time realized that expressive language plays an important preliminary role in producing prose that communicates effectively to an audience. Our method capitalizes on this interrelationship. In a recent College English article

concerning cross-disciplinary faculty workshops, Randall Freisinger argues, "If we as teachers-- no matter what discipline-- expect students to write well, we must understand the binary character of language and provide opportunities in our assignments for students to operate in both spheres" (October 1980, 155). These sequential assignments do just that.

The assignments and the course format I've discussed offer several advantages to both teachers and students:

(1) By drawing on subject matter from other disciplines, we respond to the concerns of faculty from these fields that writing courses taught in English departments better prepare students for professional writing. We also open an avenue of dialogue with non-specialists, acquainting them with current rhetorical theory.

(2) By requiring the kind of writing students need for their current majors and future careers, we heighten their tolerance for the mechanics review and rhetorical exercises which we also build into the course.

(3) By forging a direct link between personal experience and professional writing, we provide a format which helps students find their own voices and grapple meaningfully rather than mechanically with their research topics. Listen to this opening for an essay on ineffective teaching methods from a student who has worked with this method:

> As I stood in a line which formed around our teacher's large wooden desk, I glanced at the clock and noticed that

half of the class had elapsed. There was a good chance that another day would pass and I would not have my private session with Mrs. Smith. These private sessions are the basis of the Individually Guided Education system. Although I.G.E. is a form of education which teaches each child personally, I feel it is an inefficient and impractical form of instruction. This passage, unlike the one we started with, vibrates with the sound of someone who is in charge of what she is saying.

(4) Finally, by rooting each assignment in personal experience, we make use of writing's ability to serve as an avenue of self-discovery. On last semester's course evaluations one student wrote, "I learned a lot about myself. I wish I had taken the course sooner."

We certainly don't claim to have found a panacea-- we still have to deal with lots of weak writing. But using this approach and these materials we do receive more effective, more contolled-- just plain more interesting-- research papers.

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BUSINESS: JOB SATISFACTION

Level 1: Journal

Jot down the ten tasks that you most enjoy doing and the ten that you most hate doing.

Recall as vividly as possible one incident when you felt either very good or very bad about a job you had done.

Level 2: Personal Experience Paragraph

Watch several people doing their jobs or recall several workers you had a chance to observe closely in the past. Do the people you observe seem well-suited to their work? Do they appear to be both capable and happy? Is there a connection between the two?

Drawing on your own job experiences and on your observations of others at work, write a well-developed paragraph exploring one factor that contributes significantly to job dissatisfaction or satisfaction.

Level 3: General Audience Essay

Choose one occupation which you believe to have a high level of job satisfaction (not necessarily one which you plan to pursue). Watch newspaper, magazine, and television portrayals (especially ads) of people in this occupation. Is the job depicted as glamorous and/or satisfying? Interview one or two people in that occupation and ask them specifically what they like or dislike about their jobs. Find three to five popular magazine articles written in the last five years concerning the occupation you are studying. Does your research confirm or undermine your previous impression about this occupation?

Write an essay discussing the most and the least appealing factors involved in the occupation you have been studying. If applicable, compare and contrast your first impression about the job with your more informed view or compare and contrast the impression the media create about the job (especially in ads) with the reality of people actually involved in the job.

Level 4: Specialized Audience Essay

You have been hired as a management consultant to a small firm interested in improving employee morale and increasing productivity. Write a report for your client (specify the nature of the business) reviewing some specific actions the company can take to achieve its goals. Use specialized business books and journals to support your points and include several specific job situations to validate your generalizations.